

## Brainwashed - Overtone Ensemble

Written by Anthony D'Amico

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Despite being one of the more inventive and intriguing artists in the contemporary experimental music milieu, Australia's Tim Catlin is not a particularly well-known name here in the US, though he has collaborated with both Jon Mueller and Machinefabriek in the past. It is hard to say whether or not his first full-length for Important will raise his profile though, as it easily stands as one of the most uncompromisingly hyper-minimal and outré releases from the label in recent memory. For one, it is devoted primarily to works composed for the Vibrissae, a set of "microtonally tuned metal rod instruments" built by Catlin. Secondly, it provides exactly what the name "Overtone Ensemble" suggests: plenty of eerily harmonizing sustained tones and little more. As such, it is probably a hard sell for anyone not deep into the more rarified fringes of sound art, but it is a quite unique and wonderful release for those of us with ears attuned to that wavelength, at times exploring terrain not dissimilar to that of Catlin's label mate Ellen Fullman. Other times, it probably sounds like absolutely nothing else on earth.

### [Important](#)

The Overtone Ensemble project is a fairly recent development in Catlin's career, as he formed it in 2012 to focus on his Vibrissae works (the instruments borrow their name from cat whiskers). Prior to the birth of the Ensemble, Catlin was primarily known as an experimental guitarist with an impressive talent for instrument modification, building an array of guitars (and a zither) designed for bowing and unusual harmonics. He also built gongs and bells from scuba tanks and heaven knows what else. Catlin is very much an "idea man." Conceptually, the Vibrissae are an extreme but logical extension of Tim's earlier experiments with pick-up placement, eBow modification, bowing, and unconventional fret locations. While it is quite a big leap in practice to move from playing a guitar to "activating" metal rods with longitudinal stroking, it is not hard to see a piece like the ghostly, droning "Adumbration" as a bowed performance on an unfeasibly large, multi-person guitar. In essence, Catlin just ingeniously found a way to get the sustained, deeply resonant, and spectral sounds that he always wanted without having to use any effects or processing.

Of course, the downside to the Vibrissae is that rubbing a metal rod offers an extremely constrained palette, achieving a very specific sound quite beautifully, but not leaving many

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options for stylistic or dynamic variety. Consequently, these four pieces tend to take their individual character from whatever accompanying instrumentation Catlin and his ensemble throw into the mix. On "Scintillation," for example, there are some clattering metallic sounds, some gongs, and a host of harsh feedback-like whines coaxed from wineglasses or bowls. Elsewhere, "Oscillation" sounds like the ensemble is playing a complex battery of cymbals and large bells, though it gets more compelling as it gets less busy, as all the clattering racket conceals any of the microtonal harmonic activity happening in the background. In fact, it kind of sounds like a wild free-jazz drum solo if the hapless drummer in question suddenly found himself missing his snare, toms, bass drum, and high-hat. Sadly, it is not quite as great as that scenario might sound. The closing "Accretion" *is* great, however, as the ensemble uses a battery of handbells to create a vibrantly twinkling, surprisingly physical, and queasily dissonant unreality. It is like the air itself is somehow transformed into a visceral and malign entity. There is nothing else quite like it that I have heard.

To my ears, it is exclusively the bookends where the Overtone Ensemble seem like they are realizing their full potential. I would even go so far as to declare "Accretion" an absolutely singular and legitimately evil-sounding piece of music. While the middle of the album is definitely eclipsed by the surrounding pieces, I would not say that this album has any significant flaws that could be avoided: the fundamental premise is necessarily a hugely limiting one. The Overtone Ensemble's appeal lies primarily in the unique and resonant sounds that Catlin's self-built instruments generate, which can sometimes be quite amazing given the absence of processing. On pieces like "Adumbration," Catlin creates a microtonal cloud of harmonies that seems to hang in the air, shimmering and undulating with a life of its own and "Accretion" sounds like nothing less than the very fabric of reality being gleefully ripped apart. That is reason enough to hear this album, as far as I am concerned. Of course, the complex and unpredictable interplay between notes is quite wonderful as well, but the Overtone Ensemble's talents are strictly limited to texture and harmony. An argument could probably be made that there is quite a bit of hyper-nuanced melodic and rhythmic activity unfolding as well, but it is not anything that is happening on a scale that normal humans can pick up on: anyone looking for great compositions should look elsewhere, as should anyone expecting Catlin's unnerving harmonic swarm to ever blossom into a beautiful vista of warmth and consonance. This album is what it is. And what it is most closely resembles is an impossible rich, alien, and sometimes absolutely mesmerizing sound art installation that unexpectedly sprung up in my apartment.

Samples:

- [Adumbration](#)
- [Oscillation](#)
- [Accretion](#)